

Elizabeth Bowen's *Eva Trout*: Iseult as a Failed 'Writing Woman'

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0. Introduction

In *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes* (1968), Elizabeth Bowen's tenth and last novel, which develops around her eponymous heroine Eva Trout, another female character, Iseult Arble née Smith, attracts readers' interest. She has the same name as 'Iseult the Fair', the daughter of the King of Ireland in an Arthurian legend, who became the wife of King Mark of Cornwall and the adulterous lover of Sir Tristram. What does the coincidence of their names mean? The name of the heroine, Eva Trout, symbolizes a religious context in her first name, 'Eva', or her namesake Eve, and existential and psychological contexts in her family name, 'Trout'. Similar to a fish submerged underwater, she wishes to get to the surface, namely, to establish her identity. Then what about Iseult? Does her name have symbolic meaning as well? Does she embody romantic, ardent love, as her name implies?

Iseult assumes a dual importance in the novel: she becomes a struggling and failed example of a 'writing woman', and she serves as a 'catalyst' who brings about changes in Eva's son, Jeremy. Thus far, no comprehensive criticism focusing on Iseult has been published. Therefore, in this paper I would like to explore Iseult from two perspectives, as a 'writing woman' and as a 'catalyst', and clarify what functions she fulfils in this novel.

Furthermore, my analysis of Iseult will contribute to a re-evaluation of *Eva Trout*. Bowen's novels, which have long been underrated, began to receive greater critical attention around 1999, the centenary of her birth. *Eva Trout* undoubtedly became the driving force of this trend as this book differs greatly from Bowen's previous novels. Her works were mostly the traditional novels of manners, which described entangled human relations and delicate feelings in ordered sophisticated communities; whereas, *Eva Trout* is a comic narrative fully loaded with disorder, symbolism and ambiguity both in its plot and language. In earlier criticisms, Patricia Craig and Hermione Lee deemed the novel an aesthetic and technical failure (Craig 135, Lee 206-11), while contemporary critics such as deconstructionists Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, and feminists Renée Hoogland and Phyllis Lassner, tend to assess it as her most ambitious and challenging work in that it marks a new direction in her writing (Bennett and Royle 141-42, Hoogland 206-209, Lassner 163). Through my paper, I intend to present a justified and higher evaluation of *Eva Trout*.

1. Iseult as the Speaking Woman

Iseult first appears as Eva's teacher at Lumleigh, a girls' boarding school in England. Lumleigh is virtually the first school Eva attends, although she had spent less than one term, as a fourteen-year-old, at a private educational institute of which her father, Willy, was a patron. Willy, a billionaire and a homosexual, bought a castle at the lakeside two hundred miles outside London to present it to his lover, Constantine. Constantine had planned to found an experimental co-educational school by appointing his friend Kenneth as the headmaster. Eva was one of the twenty problem children from wealthy families who were sent there. Yet, this school in the castle suddenly dissolved at the end of the first term because it had been hit by various troubles—a pupil's attempted suicide, food poisoning, outbreaks of arson, pupils escaping and so forth. Since then, Eva had had no regular schooling. However, right before her sixteenth birthday, she was overcome with a desperate desire to learn. Although rather belatedly in her life, she enters Lumleigh and meets Miss Iseult Smith.

Iseult is respected by her pupils as a first rate teacher because of her intellectual ability, spiritual beauty and devotion to pupils: 'Supremacy set apart this wonderful teacher. She could have taught anything. . . . The intellectual beauty of her sentences was informed by a glow; words she spoke sounded new-minted, unheard before'.¹ As shown in this quotation, Iseult considers language to be important; notably she excels in 'writing' and 'speaking'. Because of this interest in language, she pays special attention to Eva, who has speech problems, and gives her special coaching.

Eva's speech problems are caused by her disordered personal history. When she was two months old, her mother left her and immediately after that was killed in a plane crash. Since then, Eva had been looked after by displaced persons as nursemaids. Moreover, she had often accompanied her father on his global business trips, spending her childhood in various cities around the world. During those years, she had been educated by governesses temporarily hired in each city. Therefore, Eva, whose 'outlandish, cement-like conversational style had set' (18), expresses herself like a displaced person and cannot fully communicate with others.

Iseult, who attempts to correct Eva's manner of speaking, tells her to 'join things together: this, then that, then the other. That's thinking' (71-72). In other words, she tries to initiate Eva into 'the symbolic order, the world of language and civilization' (Ingman 129). Thus, Iseult is the subject who lives in the realm of 'logos', which is associated with speech, reason and thought as the divine word, and who follows Western metaphysics based on logocentrism.

However, such an excessive inclination toward words and reason brings about emotional paralysis, in particular a lack of affection in Iseult. Iseult herself acknowledges it. In 'Midnight at Larkins', Chapter 8, Part I, which, unlike other chapters, portrays Iseult's inner world through her monologue, she says to herself: 'I am not loving by nature' (106). This lack of affection in Iseult becomes the main reason why the relationship between Iseult and Eva breaks down. Eva, who grew up in 'a hated love' (106), namely a love-hate relationship with her father, Willy, and his homosexual lover Constantine, has never received enough affection from anybody. Therefore, she believes that Iseult's interest in her is exactly the love she wants, and she feels so happy as to almost weep with joy for the first time in her life. Also, this love seems to help Eva, a fish underwater, to come up 'from the bottom of a lake' (75), namely 'to be, to become [the real self]' (216). Yet her expectation is betrayed. She speaks to a young Anglican priest, Father Tony Clavering-Haight, reminiscing about the former teacher who left Lumleigh on the pretext of her marriage and gave up Eva's coaching.

'She abandoned me. She betrayed me.' . . . 'She desisted from teaching me. She abandoned my mind. She betrayed my hopes, having led them on. She pretended love, to make me show myself to her—then, thinking she saw all, she turned away'.
(216)

Iseult's real purpose was to show her competence as a teacher by using Eva as the subject of her experiment. Thus her concern with Eva proved to be only a 'vivisectional interest' (37).

In the meantime, for Iseult, who is incompetent at love, the existence of Eva becomes too much. First, Eva forces her 'outsize will' (*Bowen's Court* 455), as Bowen calls it, and covets Iseult's affection for her: ' . . . her [Eva's] will, the patient, abiding, encircling will of a monster. . . . She was as stuck in a groove on the subject of love as probably that other victim, her father' (106). Moreover, Eva's 'consuming eyes' (106), which watch every movement Iseult makes in an attempt to learn about life, also threaten her. Iseult thinks: 'I am soiled by living more than a thousand lives; I have lived through books. I have lived internally' (107). Aware of herself as a subject soiled by learning, Iseult fears Eva's gaze of innocence and purity that she herself has lost and she therefore hates Eva.

Thus, Iseult, who has lived in the realms of logos and of bookish knowledge, can provide Eva with neither love nor experiences of life, which she eagerly wishes to gain. On the contrary, Eva forces Iseult to realize her limitations as 'the speaking woman', or as 'the subject of logocentrism', and Iseult suddenly leaves Lumleigh and marries Eric Arble.

2. Iseult as the Woman of Sexuality

It puzzled Iseult's acquaintances that she, abandoning her star career at Lumleigh, took the plunge into a degrading marriage to fortuneless, unintelligent Eric. The narrator attributes her act to 'a cerebral young woman's first physical passion' (19). Does her transformation from 'the speaking woman' to 'the woman of sexuality' only mean that she was captivated by her sexual passion? No. Through sexuality she also attempts to establish her identity, at which she failed through logos. All along, Iseult 'had been a D. H. Lawrence reader and was a townswoman' (24). So, like Lawrence who, turning away from modern civilization, regarded the primitive, the natural and the sensual as ideal, she longs for nature and sexuality. Therefore, 'the powerful sexual drive that she had sought to sublimate through intellectual activity' (Hoogland 237) at Lumleigh is directed toward Eric.

When Iseult married him, Eric was keeping Larkins Orchards, growing plums in a vast land in Worcestershire. As the owner of the fruit farm, namely the lord of earthly paradise, he seemed her to be the embodiment of Nature and Eros. Yet her expectation for the married life is betrayed immediately. First, she becomes disillusioned because Eric fails in running the orchards. Because of bad harvests due to the unseasonable weather, as well as his lack of capital and inexperience as a fruit farmer, he gives up his orchards and becomes a mechanic at a garage. Just as the fruit farm fails, Iseult's marriage fails, too. In the daytime, she confines herself to a room surrounded by Eric's unrefined 'late-Victorian furniture' (20), which is associated with the Victorian patriarchal society. Even in the nighttime when her husband is beside her, she has neither much conversation nor sexual life with him. Thus she spends her days inactively and impassively like 'a carcase' (27). In addition, Eva's presence makes her married life worse. Eva comes to live with the Arbles as a paying guest because she, who does not realize Iseult's hatred toward her, wishes to stay with her former teacher. The Arbles accept her request because they are in need of her money. However, Iseult eventually finds herself unable to stand Eva being an endless watcher and witness of her failed married life. As Hoogland puts it, thus 'having renounced her masculine brain or active intellectual powers', Iseult has 'murdered [her] life' (243).

3. Iseult as the Writing Woman

Iseult, who failed to establish her identity as a female subject by 'speech' or 'sexuality', attempts to attain it by 'writing'. Anxious to become a novelist, she has been Charles Dickens's 'votaress' (131) all along, as well as a reader of Lawrence. While translating a newly published French re-evaluation of Dickens, *Le Grand Histrionique*, both as a diversion and as a means of livelihood, she comes to take an interest not only in his works but also in

his life. This concern prompts her to select Bleak House, a Dickens museum in Broadstairs, Kent, as the meeting place with Eva. Eva, who had perceived Iseult's hatred toward her, had left the Arbles three months earlier, and now lives alone in an old house called Cathay, near Bleak House. Therefore, Bleak House becomes an ideal place for the former teacher and her pupil to meet again.

Broadstairs, northeast of Kent, was Dickens's favourite resort, where he stayed with his family every summer from 1837 to 1851. From the 1840s, he made a castellated house on the edge of the cliff overlooking Vikings Bay his summer house. While Dickens lived there, it was called Fort House, but its name was changed to Bleak House in 1901, after his novel. Bleak House once housed a Dickens museum around 1959 when Iseult was described to visit there.²

First and foremost, the Dickens room in Bleak House becomes a symbol of writing for Iseult, who aspires to be a novelist. Standing in front of his table and chair in the study, where he completed *David Copperfield* and planned *Bleak House*, she reflects on his life and writings. Furthermore, his study represents romance and sexual passion to her. On the wall near the chair hangs a small photograph of eighteen-year-old Miss Ellen Ternan. 'The inevitable eighteen-year-old', 'the young friend' (132), Ellen is the young obscure actress and Dickens's lover, whose affair with him when he was forty-six resulted in the collapse of his marriage in 1858. On her visit to Bleak House, Iseult, unlike her usual sober taste in clothes, wears a new romantic, pinkish dress with voluminous folds like a ball gown. This seems to show her longing for romance or her pseudo-identification with Ellen as Dickens's lover.

However, Iseult cannot fulfil her longing for both love and writing. Looking at Ellen's photo, she thinks, '*I should have been old for him [Dickens]*' (132, author's italics), and awakens from her fancy of romance with Dickens. Moreover, she finds her ambition to become a writer 'miscarried'. Soon after her day trip to Bleak House and Cathay, Iseult breaks up with Eric and goes to France. Although she tries to write a book there, she does not succeed. As shown when she confesses to Constantine, 'it [the book] was born dead' (269). The separation from Eric was brought on by Iseult's suspicion of Eva and Eric's adultery, which was raised by Eva's insinuating words at Cathay: 'In December I shall be having a little child' (141). Thus Iseult loses her love for Eric in her real life, and her romantic love for Dickens in her imaginary world; worst of all, she loses her dream of writing. In this sense, Bleak House, which is described as 'tall, solitary' or 'hard and bleak' (130), seems to represent Iseult's bleak and frustrated reality, that is, an isolated and unsupported life both in the present and in the future.

What then does Iseult's failure as a writing woman mean? It suggests that she is

unsuccessful in creating *l'écriture féminine*. *L'écriture féminine* is the female discourse or experimental writing to inscribe femininity, which is the concept developed by the French feminist Hélène Cixous. Cixous designates this term 'an other mode of discourse, characterized as feminine, which is repressed by and subverts the phallogocentric symbolic order' (Andermahr et al. 74). Also, she asserts that *l'écriture* originates from and by female bodies. According to Ann Rosalind Jones, an American feminist, French feminists such as Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig regard Western culture as fundamentally oppressive, as 'phallogocentric', which is the compound word of 'phallogocentric' and 'logocentric', and assert that women should resist and deconstruct patriarchal culture through 'women's bodies', 'femininity' and '*jouissance*', namely a feminine sexual pleasure. In other words, not by being sexual objects to men, but rather by women's re-experiencing the physical pleasure of infancy and of later sexuality, women seek to establish a point of view through which the phallogocentric culture and institutions can be seen and overthrown (Jones 361-66).

Likewise, Iseult hopes to create the new female discourse through sexual pleasure with Eric. However, following a series of disillusionments in her married life, this hope eventually collapses. In order to take revenge on Iseult for betraying her trust and love, Eva lies to make Iseult imagine that she has conceived Eric's child. Soon afterwards, Iseult seeks to establish her career as a writer in France, but she fails in this endeavour, too. It is ironic that she cannot create *l'écriture féminine* in France because the country is a stronghold of French feminists working on *l'écriture féminine*.

Thus, neither women's bodies nor femininity can be the positive power for Iseult to create *l'écriture féminine*. Then, does Bowen intend only to reveal the failure of a writing woman through the portrayal of Iseult? Before answering this question, I will discuss her role as a catalyst that brings about changes in other people.

4. Iseult as the Seducing Woman

Iseult is, as Lis Christensen points out, 'both a temptress and a nun' (204). It is Jeremy whom she tempts after Eva. Iseult had believed for years, on account of Eva's lie, that Jeremy is the illegitimate child of Eva and Eric. Even after she discovers the truth about his birth, she cannot refrain from her desire to meet him. So she takes him away from the studio of Miss Applethwaite, a sculptress from whom he takes art lessons, without Eva's permission.

Iseult impresses people deeply as a temptress. When Eva, who became panicked by Jeremy's abduction, questions Applethwaite closely about what the kidnapper looked like,

she describes her as 'a Zola-type harlot' (246), who let down her forelocks so that they hung over her eyes and who adorned herself with gimcracks. This image of Iseult contrasts sharply with that of her in the Lumleigh days. In the past, her most outstanding feature was 'her high white forehead' (20) that revealed her intelligence and purity. This change in her appearance reflects her degradation to the status of the 'fallen woman' who resembles 'a Zola-type harlot' or 'a tramp' (266) that follows on her failure as a writing woman. She is now internally and externally a seducing woman.

Iseult, who spent four hours with Jeremy, influences him in two respects: she stimulates his desire for knowledge and she enables him to kill Eva by giving him a revolver. Jeremy was bought by Eva as a three-year-old boy at a black market in Chicago eight years earlier, who had later turned out to be a deaf mute. The inarticulate child, so to speak, represents 'her symbolic double' (Kenney 101) for Eva who refuses to communicate with others. For eight years since then, shutting themselves away from the world, the two had lived alone together in 'a visual universe' (221) in America. During these years, the mother and the child, like 'twins in a womb' (221) immune from the outer world, enjoyed the state of being undifferentiated and symbiotically united to each other. To use Bowen's words, they are in 'the age of magic, the Eden where fact and fiction were the same' (*Collected Impressions* 269). However, after eight years, Eva returns to England with Jeremy, and this return separates her from him. Eleven-year-old Jeremy who is 'going through a phase of enlarged desires' (254) requires 'the company of an intelligent person' (254), other than his mother. Therefore, his meeting with Iseult satisfies his desires, awakening him intellectually, emotionally and sexually.

Iseult assists him in shooting Eva by giving him a revolver that had belonged to Eric. In the last scene of the novel, Eva is about to depart from Victoria Station in London for her honeymoon with her fiancé, Henry Dancey, who had once refused Eva's marriage proposal but eventually accepted it because he now realizes his true feelings for her. Suddenly, running toward Eva with the gun held high, Jeremy shoots her dead.

Making a spurt, he sped like a boy on the screen towards the irradiated figure, waving his weapon in salute. . . . Eva joyfully stepped clear of her friends and, unable to take in anything but that this *was* Jeremy, held out her arms. From behind her, there rose above other warnings a great cry of terror from Henry. She turned round in terror to see what was wrong with Henry. That instant, the revolver went off. She fell, while the shot rang round Victoria Station. (317-18, author's italics)

This violent, melodramatic ending has generated harsh criticism and led to various interpretations. Ostensibly, Jeremy's shooting of Eva seems an involuntary act of revenge for the betrayal of Eva, who left their Eden out of love for Henry. Yet, psychoanalytically, as Kristeva insists, matricide is 'the abjection', that is, to reject the abject entity of the 'mother' (12-13). According to Kristeva, it is one phase of an individual's growth where sons acquire the understanding of one's self and of the difference between 'me' and 'an Other', or 'the subject' and 'the object', and separate from their mothers. Moreover, it is the first step for boys to grow up to be the speaking male subjects through the acquisition of knowledge and language (Nishikawa 238-43). (Around this time, Jeremy is willing to receive treatment for speaking and hearing difficulties.)

Thus Iseult urges Jeremy to part from his mother by violent means, initiating him into Western culture based on phallogocentrism. Such destructive influence on the part of Iseult reminds us of Mme Fisher, the Terrible Mother in Bowen's *The House in Paris* (1935), who acts against Max, the former fiancé of her daughter Naomi, and drives him to suicide. In Bowen's novels, some women are characterized by intelligence, sexual energy and mighty will—in Bowen's expression, 'outsize will'—and they seek an outsize outlet. Mostly, these outlets are directed not to the absent or emasculated husbands but to sons or substitute sons, and produce destructive results such as death. Like Mme Fisher, Iseult is categorized as one such woman.

5. Conclusion

Although Iseult has a symbolic name that matches that of a beauty in an Arthurian romance, she proves to be unable to become the incarnation of ardent love. On the contrary, she fails in establishing affectionate bonds in her relationships with Eva and even with Eric. This is because she excessively relies on logos. After her teaching life at Lumleigh, she renounces her masculine brain—reason, words and speeches—and seeks feminine eros, through which she aims to create *l'écriture féminine*. However, she is unsuccessful in this attempt as well. Thus, in *Eva Trout*, Iseult can produce nothing from the perspective of a writing woman, although she achieves her role as a catalyst in prompting Jeremy's growth.

What does Bowen intend to show through her portrayal of Iseult? The character seems to represent women's potentials and their challenges to society in our time. Certainly, with the goal of her life unfulfilled, Iseult cannot deconstruct phallogocentric, masculine-centred culture and conventions. Yet, through her attempt she at least represents female consciousness, intelligence, sexuality and dynamic energy that expand beyond tradition and conventions. By virtue of this new potential possessed by women, she

boldly challenges social and literary realities. Herein lies the significance of the creation of Iseult.

Thus far, *Eva Trout* has received two extremely divergent evaluations. Whether positive or negative, almost all of them have been made by analysing the heroine, Eva. Unlike those critiques, my evaluation is based on an analysis of Iseult, in which lies the uniqueness of my paper. Compared with the main plot that focuses on Eva, the subplot about Iseult may not be persuasive: her behaviours, motives and psychology are sometimes described unclear, and her characterization is rather superficial. Despite these defects, however, the character of Iseult has great significance.

Bowen once declared, 'I am not, and never shall be, a feminist' ('Woman's Place in the Affairs of Man' 378). But, despite her declaration, there is no doubt that she is a feminist and that her last novel, *Eva Trout*, is a feminist masterpiece in its creation of Iseult, the new feminist character.

Notes

1. Bowen, *Eva Trout* 67. Subsequent references to this text are to *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes* (London: Cape, 1969).
2. However, since 1973, a former house of Miss Mary Pearson Strong, near Bleak House, has been open to the public as the Dickens House Museum, instead of Bleak House. Strong was a model for the character of Betsey Trotwood, David's aunt in *David Copperfield*.

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